DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 397 984 PS 024 451

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TITLE When Safety and Joy Are Breached.
PUB DATE Apr 96
NOTE 31p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (New York, NY, April 8-12, 1996).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome; Cognitive Style; Early Childhood Education; Educational Philosophy; Educational Theories; Homosexuality; *Narration; *Personal Narratives; Poverty; Progressive Education; Social Action; Social Problems; Social Psychology; Sociology; *Story Telling; Substance Abuse; Violence; Writing (Composition); Young Children
IDENTIFIERS American Educational Research Association; Camus (Albert); Foucault (Michel); Illich (Ivan); *Postmodernism

ABSTRACT

Increasingly, narrative has been accepted as an essential mode of knowing and thinking. However, contemporary educators are unlikely to acknowledge that narrative is as essential to social and political action as it is to personal catharsis and self-understanding. In many schools, narrative writing has become an end in itself rather than the beginning of curriculum work. With new emphases on whole language instruction, process writing, and qualitative research methodologies, early childhood educators are becoming more willing to listen to life stories of students and teachers. This conference paper questions the use of narrative or story in research and education. The following sections address different aspects of using personal stories in the classroom: (1) "Queer Stories," addressing changes in popular representations of gay people along with issues of postmodern theory and questioning of the "developmental canon"; (2) "The Sun Is Wearing Sunglasses," using James Garbarino's "Children in Danger" (1992) to reflect strengths and weaknesses of traditional early childhood education strategies along with discussing a therapeutic approach to classroom teaching, including how children address and represent issues of violence and substance abuse through story; (3) "Taking the Victims Side," discussing stories of witness and testimony; and (4) "Risks and Responsibilities." Contains 46 references. (BGC)

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When Safety and Joy are Breached

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Paper presented at the American Educational
Research Association Meeting
New York, New York
April, 1996

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All teachers are storytellers and I am no different. In Sex, Death, and the Education of Children (Silin, 1995b) I recount stories about my family of origin, the families which I have joined as a gay man caring for people with HIV/AIDS, and the classrooms that I visit as a teacher-educator. Now I want to question the use of story in research and education. Increasingly narrative has been accepted as an essential mode of knowing and thinking. However, contemporary educators are less likely to acknowledge that narrative is as essential to social engagement and political action as to personal catharsis and self-understanding. In many schools narrative writing has become an end in itself rather than the beginning of our curriculum work. Stories that reflect an immediate struggle for survival and knowledge of death are too often met by a pedagogical paralysis that brings its own morbid silence to the classroom. This silence belies our responsibility for what in the Jewish tradition has been called tikun olam or repair of the world.

Over fifty years ago, George Counts (1932) urged teachers to act boldly and realistically in response to the difficult and dangerous period in which they were living. The assumption of unprecedented social responsibility, he maintained, was required by "times when precedents lose their significance" (p. 51). Clearly the difficulties and dangers of life have only multiplied in the last half century, making the need for effective educational responses that much more urgent.

This year the bi-weekly meetings of my postmodern reading

group have been punctuated by conversations about the impact of government cutbacks on poor families, the fiery rhetoric of Newt Gingrich and Pat Buchanan, and the latest newspaper accounts describing the spread of guns in schools, drugs on the street, and violence in local communities. As educators and parents, we all wonder how to talk with our children about these issues. When do we start? What do we say? How do we balance our desire to protect the young and our responsibility to help them make sense of the disturbing realities of postmodern life? How do we present a manageable world to children even as we feel increasingly powerless to influence the direction and speed of social change?

In the past early childhood educators have been highly selective in their re-presentation of the world. The desire to sanitize the curriculum is an enduring theme in our field. As members of the Reconceptualizing Movement have argued (Kessler and Swadener, 1992), this desire is deeply embedded in popular ideas of Developmentally Appropriate Practice (Bredekamp, 1987), ideas that focus on the <u>when</u> and <u>how</u> of early education but not the <u>what</u> and <u>why</u>. The developmental ideology has been used to rationalize a turn from unsettling social realities, including the prevalence of death and violence in the lives of young children.

With the new emphasis on whole language instruction, process writing, and qualitative research methodologies, early childhood educators have become more willing to listen to the life stories of students and teachers. Our existential commitment to the young

and training in the literature of child development support a sympathetic responses to individual pain and suffering. But is this enough? I want to suggest the importance of a further response, one that places these stories into their political contexts. For without such contextual readings we deny the possibility of social reconstruction at the heart of progressive pedagogy. Embedded in George Counts' challenge that teachers assume unprecedented social responsibility is the demand that education contribute to the amelioration of social oppression. He argues:

> If we are content to remain where all is safe and quiet and serene, we shall dedicate ourselves, as teachers have commonly done in the past, to a role of futility, if not of positive social reaction. Neutrality with respect to the great issues that agitate society, while perhaps theoretically possible, is tantamount to giving support to the forces of conservatism. (p.51)

Our work requires a dual commitment. First, as teachers and researchers, we seek to record and analyze the narratives entrusted to us. Second, as activists, we seek to combat social injustice as it appears both inside and outside of the classroom. The intent of this paper is to explore the difficulties of honoring this dual commitment. The subject is the politics of representation.

Queer Stories

I begin by acknowledging that questions of representation

have always had a special salience for me. As a gay man growing up in the 1950s, I found my life absent from the arts and literatures in which I sought to confirm my identity. How can I ever forget finding, buying, and devouring my first book about homosexuality -- Edmund Bergler's bleak study of pathological deviance. I was fifteen. Nor, as a young teacher, could I forget the constraints posed for me by traditional representations of gay men -- emblems of moral depravity, possessed of unique powers for corrupting the young. This narrative tells a contradictory story: homosexuality is both a repugnant practice and one to which it is all too easy to succumb. Child abuse panics continue to collapse two distinct categories, homosexuality and pedophilia, into a generalized hysteria over perverts in the classroom.

David Halperin (1995) writes the history of gay liberation in terms of the struggle to wrest control of the right to name our own lives from non-gay identified people. He reads this reversal of the heterosexual and homosexual discourse in the following way:

> . . . to shift heterosexuality from the position of a universal subject or discourse to an object of interrogation and critique, and to shift homosexuality from the position of an object of power/knowledge to a position of legitimate subjective agency--from the status of that which is spoken about while remaining silent to the status of that which speaks. (p.57)

As an activist and health care advocate, I have written about how popular images of gay people shaped early HIV/AIDS prevention efforts (Silin, 1987). Others (Crimp, 1988; Treichler, 1988) have framed HIV/AIDS as an epidemic of signification in order to highlight its socially constructed nature. In recent years a rich literature has emerged that examines how diseases are represented, the political process through which material resources are allocated and public policy legislated, and the value-laden face of the scientific enterprise (Klusacek and Morrision, 1992; Murphy and Poirier, 1993; Patton, 1990). In my recent work I have sought to connect this literature with the creation of progressive HIV/AIDS curriculum (Silin, 1995b).

As an educational researcher, I have also charted how images of childhood innocence have been linked to our belief in childhood ignorance. Thus despite what children have learned at home, on the street or in the media, we still assume that it is the adult's role to protect children from knowledge of the world in which they live. Or, at best, we silently agree not to know what children already know. For if we admit to knowing what children know, we will be implicated, forced to respond and to join children as they explore a world as filled with death and danger as with security and pleasure.

In the last twenty years there have been dramatic changes in popular representations of gay people. There have also been changes in the methods used by researchers to explore the social worlds of childhood in general, and classroom settings in

particular. Kathy Carter (1993) documents the shift through which the place of narrative in the study of teaching has become prominent. Respecting the power of stories to capture the complexity, specificity and connectedness of seemingly discrete events, she also cautions against creating a new canon. Debates about interpretation, authenticity, and the role of normative values flourish only when we attend to the political contexts of storytelling. But what changes actually occur for students and teachers as a result of our stories? How are they moved to act with new purposes?

In "Sheherezade's Revenge: Theorizing Queer Narrativities," Mary Bryson (1994) talks, directly, unflinchingly, about our use of story. She asks us to consider Sheherezade who, in response to the Sultan's threat to murder each morning his new wife of the night before, determines to buy time for the women of her city by telling stories that will be entertaining and diverting. Like Sheherezade, Bryson asks, do we tell stories that please in order to survive in the professional world? Do we participate in the commodification of stories? Do we foster an imaginary tourism that allows us to visit and return from other worlds in safety, unchanged?

Narratives work through seduction. But it is only when we are able to maintain a tension between engagement and distance that a critical reading of the text is possible (Nielson, 1995). Our passionate detachment requires immersion in the stories we tell as well as space for theory and analysis. Margaret Lecompte

(1993) borrows Gregory Bateson's concept of double description or double consciousness to describe the researcher's task. The depth of our vision is reflected in the degree to which we can remain both inside and outside the events we describe. The goal is not a single unitary truth but sets of partial truths that respect differences in perspective, complexity and blurred boundaries.

Storied research opens new spaces for previously unheard voices (McLaughlin and Tierney, 1993). It also opens the possibility that these voices will be presented in ways that serve the interests of the powerful rather than the powerless (Phelan, 1993; Morrison, 1992). Double consciousness demands that we attend to questions of audience as well as authenticity in representing the lives of others (Lecompte, 1993). How might our descriptions be understood and/or utilized by less than sympathetic readers? By our informants? What might be the unintended consequences of our representations for the lives of those we have studied?

This is not to ask for politically motivated denials of lived experience, but rather that we write with a heightened understanding that visibility can lead to increased forms of surveillance and social control as well as to emancipation. I am only too aware, for example, of the way that gay life is increasingly commodified in the straight press. We are portrayed an homogeneous consumers -- white, male, with large discretionary incomes. The painful process of assuming a gay identity is trivialized. It becomes a metaphor for turning every private

trouble into a public identity. We are just like our neighbors.

My clipping file contains the story of a young Connecticut law maker, the successful sponsor of a bill banning discrimination against homosexuals (Ravo, 1992). Four months previously, just after the news conference in which he had come out as a gay man, the same law maker had been photographed kissing a friend. In the story I have saved, a presumably heterosexual colleague comments on that picture, "It is going to damage him more than his announcement. . . If a person was to come out of the closet, that is O.K., but the way he did it was unorthodox" (p. B1).

And what, I want to know is an "orthodox" coming out?

Queer theorists seek to intervene in the production of normalcy, of the new orthodoxies described above, through telling stories that go against the grain. At their best, stories function in disruptive ways, as pedagogical interventions themselves. Suzanne DeCastell (1994) argues that we must assume greater rhetorical responsibility, leaving aside safe stories that captivate and appease for narratives that articulate difference and make suffering visible. The dangers involved in such an undertaking were evident last fall at my own college when, along with a colleague, we began a reading group to explore postmodernism and early education. Although I heard only polite interest and academic requests for reading lists, my younger colleague received a multitude of hostile comments about her involvement in a project that was seen as theoretically rather

than practically motivated.

Eight of us persevered last winter, stumbling through the dense texts of critics such as Judith Butler and Charles Jencks, and the far more palatable, if equally demanding, novels of Robert Glück and Jeanette Winterson. We have learned first hand about the pleasure and pain that follows in the wake of trying to depict the unrepresentable. We appreciate anew ambiguity and double coding, partial and limited theories, and the possibilities of local networks.

Yet we remain troubled by postmodern theorists who portray the stable self as a figment of our overly psychologized imaginations (Henriquez, Hollway, Urwin, Venn, and Walkerdine, 1984). We struggle with the loss of agency and coherence we find in these texts. We look in vain for ideas about the adults we would want to see emerge from schooling -- social change agents whose actions are tied to an understanding of the structural inequities that shape our lives. We have found these concerns echoed by a growing literature that asks for a more politically oriented postmodernism (Anyon, 1994; Beyer and Liston, 1992).

At the heart of our dilemma are claims to the absolute relativity of perspectives. Can we ever anchor our interpretations in anything more than local truths? Lost in a sea of narrative fragments, what markers can we rely on to guide our teaching journeys? The postmodern story does not seem to account for the children we see before us. Children who strive to make their marks on the world, clinging to the known even as they seek

to become autonomous actors. We ask each other questions about our practice:

What would a postmodern parent-teachers conference look like, given that knowledge is always partial and uncertain?

How can we imagine the classroom as community in the face of our overwhelming differences?

Where does the questioning of the developmental canon leave us with respect to evaluating infant care programs?

We have found that it is easier to think and theorize in postmodernism than to live and act in its wake. I want to be clear. Our concerns do not mask hidden longings to go back to the simpler days when developmentally appropriate practice went unchallenged. Rather, they reflect our need to return to the classrooms and community centers, kitchens and backyards where our lives with children are lived. They remind us too, that contemporary events play havoc with hope and possibility, testing the strategies we have used in the past to shore up vulnerable young lives.

The Sun is Wearing Sunglasses

A book that has received much attention since it was published, Children in Danger (1992), reflects the strengths and weaknesses of these strategies. James Garbarino and his colleagues argue that for too many children the delicate balance between risk and resilience has been shifted by the impact of chronic community violence and the cumulative losses they have been forced to endure. The authors maintain that the school can

be a critical protective factor for them.

The program they advocate, as realized in a Chicago Headstart center, emphasizes strong attachments to one teacher, orderly classroom environments, and building the children's self-esteem. And what of the curriculum? "Especially in the early years," the authors note, "the content is almost, <u>almost</u>, incidental. Children learn by internalizing the attitudes, values and ways of meaningful others. And then, whatever content you expose children to, they learn it." (Quoted in Schorr and Schorr, 1988, p. 234) Defining curriculum in terms of interpersonal processes, they argue that

> . . . a school-based intervention of this nature is not only therapeutic and healing but also a legitimate function of institutions whose purpose is primarily 'educational.' We see teachers not as therapists but as positive role models for children in a caregiving environment that promotes mental health. (p. 130)

In fact, it seems to me that the authors do just the opposite. That is they disregard the educational as they promote a mental health, dare I say, therapeutic approach to classrooms. They are insightful and responsive to the emotions of the children. Yet contend that teachers should not initiate conversations about community violence, only respond to specific concerns raised by the children themselves. In other words, we are encouraged to talk with children in caring ways, but it doesn't really matter what we say, for in the end content is

"almost, almost, incidental."

It is not that the authors are unwilling to look at the children's lives. Rather they are unprepared to turn the harsh realities they see into curriculum. The children wounded in our urban wars require psychological first aid. They also require opportunities to tell their stories. It is our responsibility then to use these stories to promote a more systematic study of the world that the children describe. Stable adult relationships, predictable environments, and positive reinforcement are necessary to all children. But as educators, we should offer something beyond emotional reassurances and "coping skills" as ballast against the future.

The "something more" we offer, the systematic study I refer to, is the curriculum that grows out of the dramas the children create in their play and the responses that we offer as adults. This inquiry into the social world draws children together even as it directs them beyond their individual experiences. There is something to be learned, after all, from the neighborhood clinic that tends to the needs of HIV-positive children, from the shelter on the corner that feeds and houses the homeless, and from the community organization down the block fighting substance abuse.

Too often we forget that these difficult social realites which represent "change" for us as adults is simply "now" for the children. After all, that's how it is; this is the world. They have never known a time without AIDS, substance abuse or

persistent community violence, while for us these may be new and disturbing phenomena. This difference in perspective has important implications for the classroom. We may be more impressed or disturbed by changing elements of the social world than the children. They may be far readier to think about the contemporary world and to make it an object of study.

Unfortunately, as I observe in early childhood classrooms, and I speak here of the most progressive, I see very little play or social studies and an increasing emphasis on whole language instruction. Posters detailing the steps through textual production replace charts that describe group experiences. Meetings that were once forums for discussions of shared concerns have become arenas in which burgeoning literary critics couch their unfaltering positive comments in the now meaningless reframe, "I like the way you. . ." But this intensified emphasis on individual expression cannot be equated with real communication nor is it free of class, race, and ethnic bias.

Learning how to structure writers' workshops, reader response groups, and editorial conferences has become an essential part of teacher education. My own graduate students prepare for job interviews by defining their commitment to education in terms of process writing and whole language instruction. Language instruction that grows out of life experience is to be valued but does not constitute a philosophy of education. It offers no larger social vision against which to evaluate our curricular choices.

Children need to study what is, reflect on what might be, and experience strategies that help them to achieve their ends. It is the dynamic social processes as much as the internal psychological coping mechanisms on which educators must focus. I think we have a responsibility to provide opportunities for children to know themselves as young community activists and to experience the power of a collective response to large and small social problems. We must be clear that the individual we educate is a social individual, formed in and through membership in diverse groups. Harriet Cuffaro (1995) explains this Deweyan perspective on the evolving person:

> . . . the social and the individual may be said to be "two names for the same reality." It is neither the social or the individual but the social individual, each element functioning within the whole, named as separate elements for the purpose of analysis but in actuality transactionally related. Such a view ensures continuity and connections. It attends to process, time, and context. (p.23)

The difficulties faced by contemporary teachers were evident to me when the director of a substance abuse prevention project talked to a college faculty meeting about her work in East Harlem schools (Project Healthy Choices, 1995). The most affecting parts of this talk were the words and pictures of the seven year-olds themselves. A picture of two boys, two massive trees and a football, bears the following inscription across the top, "He

haves AIDS. We play together. I am his friend." Initially the artist had written "We have AIDS" but later crossed out the "We" and substituted "He." In classrooms where four and five children may have lost a close relative to the disease, such an error is understandable.

Seeking to grasp the connections among more visible forms of violence and the less obvious but equally devastating effects of drugs and alcohol, another child draws two stick figures pointing huge guns at one another. The figures are small in comparison to the space, and across the top two thirds of the page, the teacher has recorded these words:

> Drugs are terrible. Guns are bad things. Drugs are weapons. Smoking is not good for your lungs. Guns and smoke are the same thing like killing someone. They are the same like drinking beer. Someone drinks and they kill themselves one day. People drink so much when they are very disappointed.

The most unsettling picture contains no words. The upper two thirds of the paper is covered by a sky drawn with large blue marker strokes and dotted with four simple inverted-V-shaped birds. In the upper left hand corner a large, bright yellow sun has its nose, eyes, and mouth drawn in black. The lower third of the page contains rolling green hills and two trees on either side. Scattered across the ground is a mix of objects, including clearly identifiable syringes and beer cans. The child describes the scene with the following words:

> This is the sun wearing sunglasses, and the sun is trying not to see the drugs. These are all beer can and drugs and dead birds dying, and the grass is dying and the sun is dying and trying to keep everything alive, and the trees are dying and the leave are falling down and dying.

Although each of these pictures is subject to many interpretations, it was the awed silence among the adults that drew my attention at our faculty meeting. Finally one dismayed person exclaimed, "Is there no joy in these children's lives?" I don't know the answer to this question nor the best response to my colleague's evident despair. I do know that if we turn away from the children's painful and confusing experiences, then we turn away from the possibility of relief as well. Classrooms are places in which children should feel comfortable exploring a full range of emotions including authentic moments of distress and pleasure. We are fully engaged as learners only when the curriculum is responsive to the material contexts of our lives. It is through such engagement that we realize our freedom and our humanity.

Finally, we are all historical beings. Time and place are at the heart of every biography. As teachers we commit ourselves to the future generation because we know that hope resides in time, and time can only be lived in the world, a world, unhappily, that includes too much personal suffering and social oppression.

Taking the Victims' Side

Confronted by the long term effects of poverty and racism we have no certainties with which to arm ourselves. We can only begin with our willingness to hear the children out.

> . . . you cannot really make the unbearable manageable or the inexplicable understandable. But in your stance of being ready, willing, and able to help, the child can find at least temporary peace and support for his efforts to cope. If little children have a 'right' to a safe and joyous childhood, they also have right to scream out their rage and fear and to be heard and supported when their safety and joy are breached. (Warren, 1977, p. 24)

Listening, we recognize our inability to "know" the multiple risk factors to which children are exposed, to wonder if they are commensurable with knowledge at all. Such recognition directs us to the meaning of our inability to know. For it is the <u>not</u> knowing that shapes our existing pedagogical maps. How do we begin to make the unimaginable present in the curriculum? How do we manage to live with the presence of absence in our lives?

Over the last decade and a half, I have struggled to live with multiple losses inflicted by HIV/AIDS. I have learned to record my own story as a matter of survival. I have had no choice. I record the stories of friends, lovers, and colleagues because they have been entrusted to me and because they are my story too. Bearing witness to their lives insures my survival.

The way forward is through history; a commitment to telling the story is a commitment to continued life. Terrence Des Pres (1977) wisely concludes, "Surviving and bearing witness become reciprocal acts" (p. 117).

The literature of testimony that emerged during the Second World War bears witness to the events of that time (Felman and Laub, 1992). It aids us in finding a way out of the paralysis that is the legacy of an unrepresentable history. In The Plague Albert Camus' narrator, Dr. Rieux, tells the story of a deadly epidemic ravaging Oran. His very acts of seeing and telling are acts of cognition, ones in which Dr. Rieux learns about his relationship to those whose lives he documents.

> Summoned to testify regarding what was a sort of crime, [Rieux] had exercised the restraint that behooves a conscientious witness. All the same, following the dictates of his heart, he has deliberately taken the victims' side and tried to share with his fellow citizens the only certitudes they had in common --love, exile and suffering. Thus, decidedly, it was up to him to speak for all. (p. 280)

Ten years later in a striking re-assessment of our ability to bear witness, Camus wrote The Fall. Now a nameless narrator chooses not to recognize what he has seen and heard, a woman's leap into the Seine during the small hours of the morning. Paralyzed, the failed witness neither responds to her cries nor informs others of the event. In this collapse of reliable,

authoritative testimony, Camus teaches us that it is through our silences, our decisions not to know, that we make history.

Reading Camus and learning to tell my own stories of loss and separation remind me as an educator that the aesthetic is an essential way of knowing the world. I recognize that the paintings of syringes and beer cans, adults with guns and children with HIV/AIDS are an important way that children bear witness to their own struggles to survive. As teachers, we play a critical role in children's lives when we provide the tools and materials, the time and space, the permission and encouragement for them to become subjects not objects of history.

When safety and joy are breached, literature and the arts speak to us all about experiences for which we don't have words, about moments when rational analysis fails. They allow us to see the given as constructed, to glimpse new possibilities, to foster empathetic responses to others, and to capture a sense of wholeness that is so often masked by the violence of modern life. In these ways encounters with imaginative reconstructions of experience offer a route to social engagement as well as to naming our lived worlds. Maxine Greene (1995) cites this passage from Sartre (1949) which highlights the similar tasks of artists and teachers:

> And if I am given this world with its injustices, it is not so I might contemplate them coldly, but that I might animate them with my indignation, that I might disclose them and create them with their nature as

injustices, that is, as abuses to be suppressed. (p. 62-63)

Risks and Responsibilities

All claims about socially relevant curriculum draw on the legacy of progressive educators from John Dewey to Paulo Friere. Mine are no different. I have spoken to early childhood educators who have defined curriculum in narrowly academic and developmental terms and turned away from the stories of their students and colleagues. At an early childhood conference this summer, my remarks were greeted with tears of sorrow and anger (Silin, 1995a). They seemed to say -- don't talk to children about topics that will destroy their childhoods. Another audience member suggested that religious instruction should serve as an antidote to the depressing and pessimistic world I described. Yet another fervently offered her prayers on my behalf.

The open resistance I have encountered to making children's lived experienced part of the curriculum is not surprising. What has been more difficult is my own silent dialogue with progressive social critics. One group of speakers has haunted me from my days as a doctoral student. In the 1970s Neo-Marxists raised concerns about the expanding curriculum of the English Open Classroom (Bernstein, 1975; Sharp and Green, 1975). They took the position that when we encourage students to display an ever greater variety of behaviors and knowledges, we also create new opportunities for the powerful gaze of the trained professional to do its work. As psychologists, learning

specialists, reading teachers, and social workers extend their domains of expertise they bring new forms of testing, evaluation and repair. Professional knowledge claims become the basis of interventions. Interventions become the vehicle of social control.

Nor were these educationists working in a vacuum. In the late 60s Berger and Luckmann's ground breaking study The Social Construction of Reality had already alerted us to the regulatory function of psychology. And, in a very different language, Ivan Illich (1971, 1976) had also described how 20th century institutions such as schools and hospitals undermine the health of the body and viability of the body politic. At the same time, Jurgen Habermas's work spurred a variety of studies on what was then called "technocratic mindedness" in education (Bullough, Goldstein and Ladd, 1984). Habermas refers to the process in which basic life sustaining activities -- child rearing, health care, and education -- are submitted to intensive forms of rational analysis as the "colonization of life worlds." When this happens they become the locus of administrative control rather than themes for collective action. Anyone doubting the truth of this perspective has only to read a few pages of Robin Leavitt's (1995) insightful and devastating indictment of infant care programs.

Beyond this indictment of schooling as an institution of social control, it is Foucault's (1978, 1980) analysis of the link between power and knowledge that allows us to understand the

unintended consequences of our daily work. He documents the nineteenth century transformation of power from a function of law and prohibition, liberty and sovereignty, to an effect of knowledge and the practice of new technologies of the self. Through this transformation the direct exercise of force and use of punishment were replaced by the normalization of behavior and surveillance of the body. The confession, a relational strategy once confined to religious penance, came to characterize expectations of personal disclosure between patient and psychiatrist, delinquent and social worker, parent and child, student and teacher.

Joseph Tobin (1995) connects the taken-for-granted confessional techniques within early childhood education to more obvious forms of social surveillance in society at large. Contrasting American and Japanese practices, he deconstructs the unrelenting focus on self-expression and the individual in contemporary early childhood settings. Tobin's analysis is confirmed by a recent invitation I received to give a keynote speech on creating "safe zones" in kindergarten classrooms, special moments in the week when children are supposed to talk about "feelings." It is an invitation that causes me discomfort because I do not think that such moments can make up for an academic curriculum that does not speak to the things that matter in children's lives. Nor can it substitute for the political action required to ameliorate the real suffering of children and families.

Given the radical critique of schooling, how can we ask children to talk about the often painful circumstances in which they live? How can we listen to stories that tell of illegal parental activities or conditions that might lead to the disruption of fragile, domestic arrangements? Disclosure involves serious risks -- from the direct intervention of state social service agencies to official interpretations that belie lived experience. These are risks that were uppermost in the minds of teachers I have interviewed in East Harlem in connection with substance use prevention over the last several years.

Finally, I think these concerns must be balanced with stories of resistance. Feminists (Casey, 1993) document the ways that teachers -- Catholic Women Religious, Secular Jewish Women, Black Women -- have maintained lives of social activism and educational non-conformity in the face of overwhelming odds. These teachers understand the classroom as a political arena in which they can join with their students to pursue social change. They also understand local organizing to be as meaningful as larger national efforts. It is through their the daily work, small acts of resistance, as well as more dramatic acts of defiance, that possibilities emerge.

The lessons these lives teach are not unlike the lessons to be learned from HIV/AIDS activists. More than a complete program, model of liberation, or correct set of values, we simply need to be clear about what is intolerable. At the same time, we must develop an historical analysis that highlights specific,

practical strategies to use in the political struggles before us.

In her study of women teachers, Kathleen Casey (1993) is guided by the voices of Anontio Gramsci and Mikhail Bakhtin. To combat the pessimism of reproduction theorists and the nihilism of some postmodern perspectives, she chooses these words of Bakhtin with which I too will close:

> What is it that guarantees the internal connection between the elements of personality? Only the unity of responsibility. For what I have experienced and understood, . . . I answer with my life. (Quoted in Morson, 1986, p.x).

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